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PROFLIGACY IN FICTION.

Zola's "Nana."

Ouida's "Moths."

CRITICS have had their say regarding the latest product of that genius of the muck-rake, Emile Zola. Many of them have endeavored to find a justification for his opening of the sewers of human society into the gardens of literature. Much ability is displayed in this offensive work of engineering skill, and people are asked to pardon the foul sights and odors because of the consummate art with which they are presented. But intellectual power and literary workmanship are neither to be admired nor commended of themselves. They are to be judged by their fruits, and are no more to be justified in producing that which is repulsive or unwholesome than a manufactory whose sole purpose is to create and disseminate bad smells and noxious vapors. Such an unsavory establishment might do its work with a wonderful display of skill and most potent results, but the health authorities of society would have ample occasion for taking measures against its obnoxious business, while those who encouraged the introduction of its products into their households would be guilty of inconceivable folly, besides exhibiting a morbid liking for filthy exhalations.

But it is not alone in M. Zola's literary talent that excuse is found for his work. It is said to lay bare a phase of human life whose existence is actual, and knowledge of which affords security and perhaps suggests remedies for its evils. The phase of life with which he deals in "Nana" is undoubtedly real, but is, unfortunately, not so far a realm of the unknown that an accurate exploration or a vivid portrayal of its characters and scenes is at all necessary or desirable. Those who are likely to make a salutary use of a knowledge of its secrets have no difficulty in obtaining it, and there is no reason for bringing its revelations into the family circle or the chamber of the schoolgirl. The life of the fallen among women is no deep mystery. It is well enough known in its glare and glitter,

in its allurements and revelry, in its Circean fascinations and their besotting effects, in its coarse vulgarity and in its bestial pollutions. The whole Avernian descent from gay hilarity and defiance of doom to putridity and despair is a reality of the world's every-day experience. That can not be denied, and the fact is one not to be ignored. But so are the city sewers and cesspools a reality; yet their existence affords no reason for bringing them to the surface of the streets and exploring among their filthy contents in the light of day. It does not justify the introduction of their nastiness and their stench into decent habitations.

But, though these things are real, M. Zola's delineations of them are not truthful. His work has been called "realistic," and that has been paraded as a merit; but what is meant by this word upon which a new meaning is thrust to serve the purposes of criticism? People averse to analyzing take it to mean that the work in question portrays life and character precisely as they exist, without the color or the glamour which fiction is supposed generally to throw over its descriptions. But as applied to Zola's work it means nothing of the kind. It means that he drags into literature what others would not touch because of its coarseness or its foulness. He displays no extraordinary power in painting scenes of actual life, in portraying human character or in fathoming the feelings or the motives of men. But, where another paints a garden of flowers, he depicts a dunghill; where others present to the imagination fields and trees and mountains or the charms of home-life, he conjures up the prospect behind the stables, the slough at the foot of the drain, and the disgusting bestiality of the slums. This seamy side of things is no more real than the other, and its delineation no more "realistic" in the sense given to that term. Other writers introduce us to virtuous homes and make us acquainted with decent people, often with charming companions for whose existence even in fiction we find ourselves the better. M. Zola takes us among drunkards and strumpets, and brings us into familiar relations with people in his pages whose mere presence in real life is either an offense or a contamination. The "realism" of the process, if it is "realism," is no justification, but rather an aggravation. To follow a debased drunkard through the career of a day and a night would fill us with disgust, and from a street-walker's brazen solicitations we turn away with a sort of horror; and what better, more attractive, or more edifying are they if brought into our houses in a story?

But, if "realism" were an excuse for minutely depicting the viler

phases of human society, it does not exist in "Nana." M. Zola may know more of the life that he undertakes to portray than decent readers care to know, but men who go through the world with their eyes open, and are capable of making those inferences in regard to character and experience which surface indications suggest, know that this book is replete with exaggeration. It does not describe the real life of the class whose type is its central figure, with the sharp lines of truth. The picture is colossal in proportions and flaring in colors. It is no more in the tone of every-day reality than "King Lear" or "The Bride of Lammermoor." This huge, fleshly Venus, with gross attractions of person and no touch of mental or moral charm, exercising a relentless dominion of lust over the rich and proud, the stupid and the brilliant, the unsophisticated and the experienced, is a daring figment of the imagination, as much so as the witch that lured the companions of Ulysses to their swinish fate. The favorite plea of justification in the dry reality of the scenes portrayed has no basis in this story. M. Zola has been writing on a theory, and, in following it out, he has left fact behind him with the ancestors of Nana. His drunkards and washer-women were real. It was a part of his theory that the ignorance, the poverty, the vice, the crime, and the brutality of their existence were somehow imposed upon them by the constitution of society, and made up a fate for which better or more fortunate people were responsible. In the course of generations, out of this compost at the bottom of society, reeking with pollution, sprang this "golden fly," to carry infection up to the ranks of the rich, the intelligent, and the favored, and work the vengeance of the slums. The theory has a certain delusive plausibility, but its Nemesis is a creature of the fancy. As poetry, as ingenious fiction, it might pass; but its pretensions to reality are a sham, and the poor excuse of "realism" for unveiling the retreats of infamy can not be allowed to the Parisian scavenger.

But real or fanciful, fact or fiction, does not this delineation of the fatal attractions of the "strange woman" and the consequences of yielding to her wiles find justification in the revelation of danger and the warning to the unwary? Does it not beget abhorrence of what it depicts with so much power? Perhaps the Spartan father did well to exhibit before his son the awful example of the drunken helot; but, if he had sent the boy to pass his time with drunken helots and become familiar with their ways and habits, the result would hardly have justified the wisdom of the experiment. We unconsciously take on the character of our social sur-

roundings, and in the reading of fiction we subject our minds to the influences which its scenes are calculated to produce. The imagination works an inner experience whose effects upon tastes and sensibilities are not different in kind from those of the external experience of actual life. If there is any remedial influence in an acquaintance with lives of prostitution, how comes it that those who have cultivated that kind of acquaintance and obtained the knowledge which is so potent for defense are not the purest among men? Generally we find that the repulsiveness of vice loses its force upon those who come in close contact with it. The victims of Nana knew her character well enough; they knew her selfish prodigality, and the fatal consequence of dalliance with such as she; and they might even forecast her horrible fate and that of her victims. But this knowledge was no protection. Association with her did not beget repulsion; familiarity produced no warning, and those who cherished their ignorance of her world of tawdriness, of dissipation and excitement, were safest from its dangers. The man would be set down as reckless or a fool who should take his sons or his daughters through the purlieus of vice, and make them acquainted with dens of infamy and their inmates, on the pretense that what they should see and hear would protect them from the allurements of sin. The result would be only to deaden sensibility, to destroy delicacy, and to remove the wide barrier that keeps the steps of good intent from straying into ways of peril; and it makes no difference whether people are introduced to the retreats of harlotry in actual experience or in the vivid pages of the novelist, the moral effect is the same. The mystery is removed, and the vague sense of unknown dangers goes with it. This gilded realm with its sensuous attractions is opened to the mental ken, its characters are revealed, and its scenes laid bare with more or less of truth, and the familiarity which the reader acquires with its interior life seems to bring him into closer contact with it, and make an actual entrance an easy matter. Such a book, whatever its effect may be upon the thoughtful, is certainly not a warning to the unwary. It is no preacher of virtue, but a guide to debauchery.

On no ground, intellectual or moral, is the publication of this kind of literature to be justified, but it can not be prevented. Liberty has its penalties and its drawbacks, but it is too precious a boon to be easily placed in the power of official and officious meddlers. Zola's brain is at liberty to produce according to its nature, but the shame is, that thousands of decent people, people claiming the high-

est respectability and the purest taste, should take the foul brood of his incubation into their homes. To those for whom it has no novelty it is merely a new incitement to sensuality. To those for whom it brings a revelation it is contaminating, and opens to view a phase of life that had much better remain hid. And yet such are the freaks of what is called popular taste that this stuff has been tolerated as family reading. It has found its place on the drawing-room table, and served to divert the mind of fashionable piety after a lenten service. Critics have juggled with meaningless words until people have come near forgetting that indecency can not be changed by phrases nor immorality transformed by a cloak of sophistry.

"Zola will want a lower deep before long, I suppose : he will do well to leave his cellars for the drawing-rooms." Thus the profligate Russian prince to the deceitful Englishwoman in Ouida's "Moths," the chief rival on fashionable book-stalls of Zola's "Nana." But why should "Ouida" think of abdicating in her prime to the upstart Frenchman? Surely there is no profligacy in the drawing-rooms, or in the inmost closets of the houses of fashion, which she can have any delicacy about dealing with. Zola may as well keep to his cellars, while "Ouida," with feminine penetration for the hidden or the merely surmised, makes exploration of the apartments above stairs. Zola professes to describe the vice that dresses in its own garb and passes by its own name, and which is forced accordingly to keep within a domain of its own, out of the range of decent social life. "Ouida" spies about genteel society in search of vice disguised by rank, by wealth, by culture, or by fashion. It is a task for a woman, but it needs for its performance a woman of great cleverness and no special regard for virtue, real or assumed. "Ouida" is well qualified. She owes society a grudge, possibly because society, whatever secret guiltiness may lurk in its most pretentious walks, is not openly tolerant of a disregard of the canons of morality, whose outer bulwark is conventionality. With the private character or conduct of the woman known as "Ouida" we have nothing to do, but as a writer she shows the result of a peculiar training. It is evident that she has known nothing of home influence, and has no appreciation of the graces of character which it produces. She has no understanding of home relationships or of their value in the conservation of purity and health in human society, and she has no respect for them. A brilliant girl, dependant for her training on a father of irregular habits and no domestic life, brought up at watering-places and in visits to gay capitals, educated among the shows and shams

of life, and a stranger to domesticity of any sort, may develop into an entertaining writer, but can have no intimate knowledge of that which is sound and wholesome in the composition of human society. Disregarding the rules and restraints which experience has shown to be necessary for the protection of virtuous character, she is sure to be guilty of offenses of whose heinousness she has no appreciation, and the social penalty for which she regards as not only tyranny, but a hypocritical tyranny. She cherishes resentment against society, and is eager to revenge herself upon it. If she wields a keen pen, it is not difficult. What is called society, like the individual man and woman, or the human race as a whole, has its faults and vices. It is only necessary to seize upon these, and, with the coarse satire of caricature, to represent them as the essential elements of its character.

"Ouida" has a very bad opinion of the women of society. She considers them no better than that *demi-monde* which Zola has seen fit to describe for the edification of the prurient. "The streets absorb the girls of the poor," she says; "society absorbs the daughters of the rich; and not seldom one form of prostitution, like the other, keeps its captives 'bound in the dungeon of their own corruption.'" She has put her opinion of society women into a wordy formula, which she is so taken with that she repeats it with slight variation of phrases at an interval of one hundred and fifty pages in her story. The earlier version is this: "Useless as butterflies, corroding as moths, untrue even to lovers and friends, because incapable of understanding any truth; caring only for physical comfort and mental intoxication; kissing like Judas, and denying in danger like Peter; tired of living, yet afraid of dying; believing, some in priests and some in physiologists, but none at all in virtue; sent to sleep by chlorodine, and kept awake by raw meat and dry wines; cynical at twenty and exhausted at thirty, and yet choosing rather to drop in the harness of pleasure than fall out of the chariot-race for an instant; taking their passions as they take sherry in the morning and bitters before dinner; pricking their sated senses with the spice of lust or jealousy, and calling the unholy fever love; having outworn every form of excitement except the gambler's, which never palls, which they will still pursue when they shall have not a real tooth in their mouths or a real hair on their heads—the women of modern society are perhaps at once the most feverish and the most frivolous, the basest and the feeblest offspring of a false civilization." Her opinion of men is no higher, though she is not

moved to formulate it in the same ferocious spirit, and her philosophy of marriage is drawn from her opinion of the unfortunate sexes of humanity. She represents her Russian prince, who is the incarnation of the masculine vice and brutality of society, as thinking, "as men do every hour and every century, why it was that the pure woman wearies and palls, the impure strengthens her chains with every night that falls. It is a terrible truth, but it is a truth," adds the author on her own account.

The works of "Ouida" are charged with offending against propriety. She professes to regard them simply as giving truthful pictures of human society as it exists to-day. If this were so, we might well despair of the human race, and anticipate an impending doomsday which should sweep the corrupt fabric away as the last failure of a disgusted Creator. In her pages, men are swayed by the passions of their lower nature, and women are not merely their weak and willing victims but their artful and ready seducers. A faithful husband is a thing to be laughed at; a faithful wife, a creature who foolishly mopes and suffers when she might gayly avenge. Marriage is a bondage of the law, fatal to love, and hence to fidelity, and the cover of intrigue and iniquity. Society is false and corrupt, and knows it, but protects itself from collapse by a common consent to pretend that it is otherwise, until some fool rebels and makes a scandal. Then the fool must be suppressed, the victim of exposure ostracized, and the shallow comedy is resumed. Husbands have mistresses as a matter of course, and wives have their lovers. Why should they not, as love disappears after the honeymoon, and they would otherwise be unendurable to each other? Each knows the other's sins, but pretends to be blind, and so avoids disturbing the serenity of fashionable hypocrisy.

This is human society according to "Ouida"; society itself takes the gross libel without resentment, and "Ouida" is one of the most popular writers of the day. There is no doubt that Zola in his cellars finds a world of reality, full of sinks of pollution and infested with foul vermin. Men go down into it for gross revelry and dark debauchery, and emerge moral and physical wrecks. Its crawling and infectious creatures, in the gaudy colors that putrescence often begets, make their way to the light and fasten upon their victims at every chance. But the glare which the clever French *feuilletoniste* turns upon the underground world is garish and delusive. In the ranks of respectable society the baser passions of mankind break out in secret or open revolt against the restraints

of moral duty or social decency, and "Ouida" has human fact to deal with. But is this the substance of society, even of the showy and frivolous kind over which Fashion reigns? Pampered princes may be monsters of iniquity, and be tolerated because of their rank or wealth. The sins of the rich and powerful may be too easily condoned, and the weaknesses of women of influential families may be covered with a veil that nobody cares to tear away; but is society made up of such, and is this caricature to be taken as a truthful picture, even in the gay capitals of Europe or the resorts of fashionable diversion? A cynical Frenchman or a much-traveled adventuress of no nationality may gain admission to the ranks of literature with elaborately garnished stories from the slums and bagnios or from the scandals of the divorce courts, but Anglo-Saxon readers at least should shut the vile rubbish from their libraries. Anglo-Saxon ideas of society and of human life are not those of Zola and "Ouida." With that race the sensual was never uppermost even in its rudest days, when brutality of the roughest sort might be laid to its charge. It believes in the purity of woman, the fidelity of man, the sanctity of home and the family, and the possibility of a society in which the passions are controlled by a sense of duty and of right. With them the love of man and woman is not an animal appetite to be sated and then to give place to indifference or aversion. It is a holy sentiment on which lifelong companionship and helpfulness are to be based, and from which spring the sweet influences of domestic life and the graces of personal virtue and integrity. The Anglo-Saxon mind is not tolerant of infidelity or profligate practices cloaked by social pretensions, nor does it find entertainment in the garbage of the slums and the orts of unseemly households. It regards society as made up of families, in which decency is held in esteem, where the rose remains on the fair forehead of an innocent love and is not displaced by a blister, and where marriage vows are not rated with dicers' oaths. Society has in it healthful currents and the substance of a sound constitution.

English literature from its beginning has truthfully reflected the social life, the character, and the manners of the people whose blood is English, and there is nothing of which we have more right to be proud than the steady purification of the stream. The coarseness of some of the early poets and dramatists may have been "realistic," but it puts their works on neglected shelves in these days of purer manners. The first novels were so much given to

accounts of disreputable intrigue, and so infected with the baser qualities of human nature, that, for a long time, all novels were under a Puritanic ban not wholly without provocation. The drama of the time when "*Astræa*" loosely trod the stage has gone out, and fiction of the school of Fielding and Smollett has passed from life into history. Latterly we have had in English novels many inspiring and purifying pictures of home-life and the fairer aspects of society. Their lessons have been wholesome and their influence ennobling. They have taught us the comeliness and attraction of virtue, the beauty of honor, and the happiness that comes from noble living. In them fathers are respectable, mothers thoughtful and pure-minded, and sons and daughters have their steps directed by some loftier purpose than the gratification of the impulses that come from the animal nature. English fiction has been a powerful agency of reform and purification.

Upon this fair domain of our literature these foreign purveyors of infection—for "*Ouida*" has no claim to the title of Englishwoman—are permitted to intrude. They turn the gutters into our wholesome gardens and cast the uncleanness of the divorce court about our hearthstones. The rubbish which, in flaring pictorial weeklies, is excluded from respectable kitchens, is elaborated and embellished in gilt bindings and admitted to the parlor-table. It is the last tricklings of that ribald literature which has run through history in a happily decreasing current from the old times when human passion was deified and the rule of the senses was hardly resisted. It is the legacy of Sodom and Gomorrah to subsequent generations, the heritage that besotted Rome left to the nationalities that drew blood from her bloated carcass. To the Anglo-Saxon mind and heart it is or ought to be an offense and an insult.

Condemnation is not to be pronounced upon the authors of this sort of fiction more than on its readers. The writers have their gifts, and use them according to their nature. They are the scavengers and scandal-mongers of society, who will exist so long as they are paid and encouraged. They can not be silenced or suppressed; but it is a sorry indication when their books are in demand at the circulating libraries and the fashionable shops for literary pabulum in English and American cities. Their presence in drawing-rooms shows that the old infection still asserts itself in the appetite—taste it can not be called—which craves a stimulant for passion, and is tormented with prurient longings. It is the same spirit that leads to the secret traffic in the merely libidinous in litera-

ture and art, the same that prompts the collecting of old indecencies at fancy prices under the pretense of "rare and curious," the same that promotes the gross sensuality that Zola pictures, and the yieldings to lust in which "Ouida" revels. The old Adam in the blood of the race, that besets its course with vice and lapses from integrity, is that which finds satisfaction in the perusal of literature wrought from the material of its sin and weakness. Pruriency and that alone is gratified, and at the same time excited and intensified, by this kind of reading. Pure taste and virtuous inclination find nothing congenial in it, and respectable drawing-rooms should as sternly close their doors against it as they would against the characters that pervade it.

A. K. FISKE.